

Back to Basics:  
International Collection Development  
on a Shoestring

Nara L. Newcomer  
Music Library, East Carolina University,  
Greenville, NC, USA  
[newcomern@ecu.edu](mailto:newcomern@ecu.edu)

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** This article explores collection development for small libraries facing an extremely restricted budget, with an additional focus on international school libraries.

**Design/methodology/approach** Drawing on the author's experience as a professional consultant for Oasis International School, Ankara, Turkey, this case study provides collection development advice, tips for librarians interested in volunteering or international travel, and a literature review.

**Findings** An extremely restricted budget and the complexities of an international environment need not prevent libraries from taking steps towards improving their collection. Strategies include: seeking targeted donations from publishers, granting organizations, individuals, and others; intelligently exploiting non-targeted donations; utilizing volunteers; carefully balancing preservation and access; and implementing a basic inventory/circulation system.

**Research limitations/implications** Similar case studies undertaken at other libraries would add to the sparse literature on restricted budget and international school library collection development.

**Practical implications** International and domestic school libraries facing a restricted budget will gain concrete advice on collection development. Librarians interested in volunteering or international librarianship will find practical guidance.

**Originality/value** This article fills a gap in library scholarship by focusing on collection development issues facing international school libraries with an extremely restricted budget.

**Keywords** Collections management, Financing, International librarianship, School libraries, Turkey

**Article Type** Case study

## **1. Introduction**

An old saying admonishes “when opportunity knocks, open the door.” In 2008, I heard knocking for a unique opportunity to travel to Ankara, Turkey and volunteer as a professional librarian at Oasis International School. Working with an international pre-kindergarten through high school library may not seem an obvious opportunity for an academic music cataloging librarian, but I will never regret opening the door to an expanded world of librarianship beyond the confines of my comfortable American library.

The present article uses my work with Oasis International School as a starting point to explore collection development for international school libraries with an extremely restricted budget. Strapped domestic libraries and librarians interested in volunteering or international travel will also learn from this case study. Throughout, I include concrete advice that can be transferred to a diverse range of individual situations.

## **2. Background**

Though Oasis International School is not a Turkish national school, the country’s history and culture set the stage for the school’s operating environment. Turkish civilization stretches back to the very beginnings of ancient history, and the region’s first libraries are now historic relics; however, the current Republic of Turkey was only founded in 1923, and modern librarianship is still in its infancy.

Oasis International School is a new and growing (founded 2004) international school in Ankara, Turkey's capital and second largest city. The school provides an English, American-based international education to pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade students of many nationalities. The library began from the ground up when the school opened, was initially overseen by volunteers, and contained approximately 5,000 books available for checkout when I visited in 2008. For the 2008-2009 school year, Oasis hired its first full-time librarian.[1] I began consulting with the librarian via phone and email in late 2007, and eventually planned a two-week onsite visit in October 2008.

### **3. Literature Review**

A survey of the literature revealed only four articles on Turkish librarianship, all focusing on Turkish national libraries and populations. Scepanski (1998) offered a thorough, well-documented overview and timeline for the history of Turkish librarianship. Önal (2005) described "the history, growth, and development of school libraries in Turkey from 1923 to 2004," concluding that libraries are key to Turkish education but need to be improved and standardized in numerous specific ways. Yılmaz (2008) summarized the history and current status of "Public Libraries in Turkey" from the dawn of civilization to the present. In an earlier study, Yılmaz surveyed 1800 public library users in Ankara, Turkey and concluded the community was "not using the public library enough" (Yılmaz 1998).

In addition, there exists a small body of literature on international schools worldwide and the work of American librarians at national schools outside the United States. Fryling (2003) told of an American librarian's experience at a South African national school, and Skirrow (2003) described a well-funded Austrian international school. American librarians interested in coordinating and enjoying international librarianship will discover useful advice from Groves (2007). Throughout this literature, there is scant focus on collection development. The current article fills a gap in library scholarship through a case study focusing on collection development issues facing international school libraries with an extremely restricted budget.

#### **4. Two Paths to International Librarianship**

American librarians interested in practicing internationally often seek opportunities through formal, established programs. There are many advantages to such programs, including that much of the planning and legwork is done by the sponsoring organization, which may also provide training and information on best practices. For more information on international librarianship opportunities, see Groves (2007). However, I discovered Oasis International School through word-of-mouth and so coordinated my work directly with the school without the aid of any outside program. Specifically, the school's librarian was my own sister. While not everyone has a relative at an international library, it pays to keep your eyes and ears open via listservs, community and religious groups, and other networks, and to

spread word of your interest to friends, acquaintances, and colleagues. You never know when or where an opportunity will arise.

Especially since I did not work through a formal organization, my work with Oasis is ongoing. I recommend that librarians who coordinate an international experience outside a formal program be particularly prepared to correspond, plan, and cultivate a relationship before their onsite experience, and to engage in ongoing contact after returning home. Both the visiting librarian and the host library will profit from such an understanding, and modern technology makes it much easier to stay in touch even at great distances.

## **5. Challenges in Collection Building**

Oasis International School faces many collection building challenges, some specific to the Turkish environment, but many shared with other international and domestic libraries because they emanate from two main factors: tight funding, and the international environment. The first factor, funding, is certainly not a unique problem; many libraries face budget constraints. Small libraries associated with schools, community organizations, religious groups and the like may particularly feel this strain. The second factor, the international environment, creates challenges that will be shared by international schools worldwide. The challenges created by these two factors are: obtaining books and supplies, building a donation-based collection, collection inventory and management, and the school's international focus.

### **A. Obtaining Books and Supplies**

Both funding issues and the international environment create difficulty for Oasis in obtaining books and supplies. In Turkey, English-language books are generally hard to purchase or borrow, not only for the library, but also for students and their families. Most English-language books must be purchased from the United States or United Kingdom, and international shipping rates paid. These rates can easily double the price of a book, and well-funded international schools commonly allocate as much as one-third of their book budget to shipping costs (Gordon 2003). In America, a weak school library collection might be mitigated by access to free public libraries full of English-language books, but in Turkey this option is unavailable because Turkey's public library system is less extensive than the United States' and focuses on Turkish-language books. This lack of alternative access to English-language books makes the school's collection even more important to students and their families.

### **B. Donation-Based Library Collections**

Oasis' library was initially built almost exclusively from donations. Book donations are undoubtedly a mixed blessing for any library, but building a balanced collection primarily from donations poses unique challenges. Not surprisingly, Oasis received much more donated fiction than nonfiction. Most people cycle large amounts of fiction through their



personal libraries, but hold their smaller collections of non-fiction for long-term reference, only donating when the information becomes outdated. Similarly, picture books and elementary school level books far outnumber high school level books as benefactors unload materials their progeny have outgrown. A well-funded library can correct such skews by purchasing materials unlikely to be donated, but a library tight on funds will be unable to fill in these gaps. The skew can become particularly noticeable in a situation like Oasis': because the library is still in its infancy and materials are difficult to obtain, nearly every donated book was initially added to the collection.

### **C. Collection Inventory and Management**

Some method of inventorying and circulating materials is required for good collection building, but cash-strapped schools may be reluctant to expend funds or energy on such endeavors. During Oasis' early years, the library lacked any sort of card catalog, electronic database, or other inventory system. Books were simply labeled and shelved. Not surprisingly, teachers and students had difficulty locating materials and even purchased unnecessary duplicates, not realizing the library already owned the book.

### **D. International Focus**

While Oasis teaches an American curriculum, it seeks to provide an international education to all students. Therefore, Oasis' students need access to books about many

different countries, peoples, and customs. As I sought materials prior to my visit, it became immediately apparent that books published in the United States are very America-centric. For example, biographies of American heroes like Abraham Lincoln or Davy Crocket are abundant, and books on money focus on American currencies. While today's greater international awareness and subsequent publishing of more diverse books make it easier to purchase new books with an international focus, Oasis' collection has thus far been built largely through older donations from the United States, and the American skew is obvious in their collection.

Oasis' international environment also aggravates challenges all libraries face in preserving their collections. Oasis' students are from families of many diverse cultures and languages. Many students have few or no books, particularly English-language books, in their homes, so Oasis' librarian cannot assume students learn about book care at home. In addition, the difficulty and costs associated with obtaining replacement books heighten the importance of protecting library materials.

## **6. Solutions to Collection Building Challenges**

### **A. Targeted Donations of Materials**

In contrast to the challenges of donated books, targeted donations are an effective way for libraries with very restricted budgets to build their collections. As soon as I booked

my flight, I made it my goal to fill my luggage with materials for the school and eventually transported nearly 250 pounds of books and supplies[2], most obtained through strategies described in the following paragraphs. Of the organizations I contacted, thirty-six percent responded with a donation, a good success rate considering each request's low opportunity cost of approximately an hour to customize a standard request and postage for those companies unwilling to accept email contact.

Publishers are among the most obvious organizations from which to seek book donations. Contact domestic publishers in both the library's country and (if applicable) your own country, as well as international book jobbers. Before contacting publishers, clearly define the library's needs. For example, Oasis' greatest need was for nonfiction materials on all grade levels, so I did not contact publishers who only sell fiction. Start your search for publishers online, but remember other options. You might ask a librarian at a larger library to recommend favorite publishers, or if you have physical access to a larger library (even if only on an occasional basis) browse the shelves and note publishers of the types of materials needed. However you discover a publisher, visit their web site to identify any specific publishing focuses. Many publisher web sites even include specific information for donation-seekers, such as how the publisher prefers to be contacted (e.g. email, mailed letter, special form, etc.), the publisher's specific goals for charitable contributions, or the criteria used for selecting recipients.

Use your gathered data to write a convincing request. To save time, craft one standard letter and tailor it to each publisher. Even if a publisher requires using their special form, you can transfer the basic information from your generic letter. In the letter, briefly explain your project and how the donation will assist the library and its users. Show how your project matches the publisher's specific donation goals and publishing focuses. Be sure to mention any deadlines for receiving the material, remembering to allow plenty of time. For example, I sent requests over two months in advance and received all donations before my departure. Finally, include all your contact information: mailing address, email, and telephone. Don't force the publisher to contact you for final details. One publisher responded to my request by simply mailing a huge box of books. If I hadn't included all needed information in my initial letter, they may not have made the donation.

Also consider seeking grants and book donations from organizations devoted to education or literacy such as the Sabre Foundation ([www.sabre.org](http://www.sabre.org)), Books for Africa ([www.booksforafrica.org](http://www.booksforafrica.org)), or WorldFund ([www.worldfund.org](http://www.worldfund.org)). To find more organizations, check the American Library Association's list of book donation programs (<http://delicious.com/alalibrary/bookdonations>), and investigate government-sponsored literacy initiatives. Before contacting granting organizations, especially those outside your country, keep in mind that customs costs (and sometimes all shipping costs) are often the responsibility of the receiving agency. Make sure you will receive useful materials, that you have the funds and logistical ability to handle the sometimes large delivery, and that you

allow sufficient lead time. Due to time constraints, financial restrictions, and logistical considerations, I chose not to pursue aid from granting organizations for my work with Oasis.

In addition to contacting publishers and granting organizations, seek donations from individuals interested in supporting your library. As with publishers, target your requests whenever possible, considering simultaneously the library's needs and the type of item the donor would most enjoy giving. Two examples of individual donations to the Oasis library illustrate this point. First, the librarian asked parents of Oasis students to consider donating an English-language book about their home country or some aspect of it. She found parents were excited to ensure their own culture was represented and this campaign resulted in a number of new books which simultaneously improved the international focus and generally strengthened the non-fiction section. Second, the librarian and other teachers compiled a list of needed current magazine subscriptions, then targeted individual donors to sponsor one or more subscriptions, again with good success.

Publishers, granting organizations, and individuals may be the most likely sources for donations, but don't stop with the obvious. When Oasis' librarian mentioned she would love to circulate tote bags, I discovered my local news station was happy to support the school with a donation of seventy tote bags. Along the same lines, you might ask library vendors for supplies or local businesses for promotional items to use as reading incentives.

## **B. Non-Targeted Donations of Materials**

While non-targeted donations can be harder to deal with, they can still enhance the collection. Though Oasis had received a large number of used book donations, many sat unprocessed in boxes and closets due to lack of time. Oasis' librarian and I sorted through the unprocessed books, hand-picked non-fiction and internationally focused books, and added these to the collection immediately.

As an additional strategy, the library held a book sale. A successful book sale requires careful logistical planning. Ensure that the space is reserved well in advance, and gratefully accept any and all volunteers. Decide whether the sale should be held during school hours or at another time. If held during school hours, consider setting aside the first part of the sale for students only, allowing them an opportunity to make selections before parents arrive and purchase much of the goods. At the sale, organize books by topic if possible. Keep pricing simple; perhaps even selling all books at one single price. This facilitates making change and also helps student purchasers budget their money.

The book sale simultaneously disposed of nearly 1,000 excess books from non-targeted donations and raised funds to purchase items the library desperately needed. As an added bonus (particularly valuable in the international environment), the sale encouraged literacy and reading by providing students and their families with an inexpensive option for obtaining English-language books.

### **C. Donations of Time (Volunteers)**

In addition to material donations, a library's collection can be improved by donations of time. Oasis owes the very existence of its collection to the hard work of several dedicated volunteers who ran the library for its first few years of existence. However, running a library solely with volunteers poses obvious challenges including high turnover and lack of a single vision. Volunteers also do not generally have a library background or training, and when working alone quickly find they are in over their heads.

On the other hand, volunteers working under the direction of a librarian have enormous potential. While I was in Turkey, I trained two parent volunteers to enter bibliographic data into the library computer system. After my departure, these volunteers and others continued to enter data as well as aiding with circulation, shelving, processing, and other projects. The librarian also started a "library helper" program, recruiting twenty-five student volunteers in the first semester alone. Utilizing students for shelving, shelf-reading/management, and other tasks frees her time, keeps the library orderly, gives the students ownership in the library, and reinforces library skills. To ensure success when utilizing volunteers, always give thorough instructions, both verbally and in written form. Try to discover the tasks each volunteer is most interested in, and assign those areas as much as practical. Finally, don't forget to thank volunteers with a note or small gift at the end of the year.

#### **D. Preservation Strategies**

Two key strategies address Oasis' preservation concerns while still ensuring students have easy access to materials. First, Oasis' librarian circulates the donated tote bags described above and teaches students to use the bags at home as a special storage place for their library books, and additionally teaches general book care principles. This practice is particularly employed with elementary school students. Second, the librarian has instituted a clear circulation policy with enforced due dates and fines.

#### **E. Implementing a Computerized Library System**

From the earliest planning stages for my visit, it was obvious Oasis needed a method to inventory and manage its collection. The school furthermore needed to improve patron access and meet accreditation requirements, so Oasis began work toward implementing a computerized library system. As an alternative to purchasing a commercial system, Oasis found a volunteer programmer willing to create a customized library computer system. Building even a basic library system from the ground up is a daunting challenge, and likely not the best solution for most libraries; it is, however, one option to consider. Purchasing a low-cost inventory-type system or using open source software [3] are two alternatives to building a system from scratch. Nonetheless, Oasis decided a custom program was best in their situation, and so I offer advice to others who may need to consider a similar solution.



Oasis' librarian and I identified three overarching needs for their computer system: cataloging, circulation, and a searchable public catalog available within the school's computer network. We created a list of specific basic functionalities within each main category:

Cataloging Needs:

- Input data manually
- Find and import data from free sources
- Search and edit existing data

Circulation Needs:

- Check out materials
- Check in materials
- Easily search and retrieve patron records in the database, including by class group
- View what a patron has checked out
- View all checked out materials by due date

Public Catalog Needs:

- Search for material by author, title, or subject keywords
- View search results, including option to see all data entered while cataloging
- View location, call number, and whether an item is available for checkout

These functionalities may seem very basic and obvious, particularly to anyone who has ever used a commercial integrated library system, but it can actually be tricky to sort out “nice” from “needed” and establish a concise list. Furthermore, clear communication of all functionalities was particularly important since Oasis' programmer lacked library experience.

The same principles of determining and clearly communicating what is really needed apply to implementing and using a library system once it is created. Take care to adhere to the guiding principles of librarianship, but do not blindly follow recognized standards. Remembering this advice is particularly important for anyone who is or ever has been employed at a larger library. Large libraries carefully follow many established standards (including AACR2, the MARC format, and the Library of Congress classification system) to ensure their data and practices are consistent and compatible with other libraries. However, small libraries like Oasis do not need to be compatible with other libraries, so adherence to standards for standards' sake could be pointless and detrimental. Nonetheless, any library will benefit from adhering to the principles behind standards and from employing selected standards that do meet their needs.

Oasis' choices in several key areas of implementing their library system will guide other libraries in wise employment of standards. When making decisions, consider both the current collection and anticipated future growth.

To classify nonfiction materials, Oasis used the existing standard of the Dewey Decimal system rather than devising a completely new scheme. The whole numbers of the Dewey Decimal schedule are available free online from OCLC (<http://www.oclc.org/dewey/resources/summaries/>). Whole numbers were sufficiently granular for Oasis' small collection, and the school saved the cost of purchasing Dewey books. As a bonus, eliminating decimals made it easier for student library helpers and other volunteers to shelve books correctly. To complete the call number, Oasis added the first three letters of the author's last name after the Dewey number. This system was adequate in all sections except two: the 590's (animals) and the 900's (geography/history), because it did not group all the books on one animal or country together. Therefore, in these sections, Oasis added the first three letters of the animal/country instead of the first three letters of the author's last name after the Dewey number. Even though every book on a particular animal/country receives the same call number, Oasis has few books on each animal/country and this method does not cause problems finding materials.

In creating cataloging procedures, simplicity and clarity are essential, particularly when utilizing volunteers. Consider what data will most help patrons find materials, and unashamedly ignore other areas. For example, capitalization did not affect searching in Oasis' system, so I abandoned capitalization standards and consciously omitted instructions about capitalization. Where consistency is needed, however, create clear instructions and insist they be followed and that data is carefully checked for typographical and other errors. With these considerations in mind, Oasis entered the following data for each book:

- Author (including illustrators)
- Title
- Publisher
- Year published
- ISBN
- Subject keywords
- Dewey call number
- Barcode
- Information about the book's location in the library and reading level

While this data may be manually keyed for each book, numerous free sources of bibliographic data will aid efficiency and accuracy. For non-MARC based systems like Oasis', download data from ISBNdb.com ([www.isbndb.com](http://www.isbndb.com)). For MARC-based systems, download MARC records from many libraries, including the Library of Congress (<http://catalog.loc.gov>). A Z39.50 client aids in finding and downloading MARC records. If your system does not include a Z39.50 client, use freeware like the Mercury Z39.50 Client ([www.basedowinfosys.com/projects/mzc](http://www.basedowinfosys.com/projects/mzc)), MarcEdit (<http://oregonstate.edu/~reaset/marcedit/html/index.php>), or one of the clients listed by the Library of Congress ([www.loc.gov/z3950/agency/resources/software.html](http://www.loc.gov/z3950/agency/resources/software.html)). Both MarcEdit and the Mercury Z39.50 Client can also convert MARC records to other formats such as XML or text.

Further discussion of two specific fields in Oasis' database will exemplify the concept of looking to the principles behind library standards. In the title field, the MARC data format used by many libraries utilizes specific coding to ensure that titles do not file under initial articles (a, an, the, etc.) While coding for articles was not possible in Oasis' system, they could adhere to the principle of not filing under articles by moving the article to the very end of the title. (Another option might be to omit initial articles altogether.) In the subject field, Oasis chose to use subject keywords rather than an established list like Library of Congress or Sears subject headings. However, it was necessary to emphasize to volunteers to enter keywords, not write a synopsis or summary of the book. For additional ease and consistency, newer books include Cataloging-In-Publication data with Library of Congress subject headings which can be used (exactly or in adapted form) for subject keywords.

## **7. Final Advice**

I offer a few final words of advice to anyone in a similar situation, whether as an outside consultant or as an insider in charge of a library.

### **A. Seek The Advice Of Experts**

Oasis' librarian sought my expertise as a professional librarian. I in turn sought advice from others more experienced in school librarianship. Today's connectivity means you do not have to go at it alone, even if your advice comes from miles away. I did a large

amount of consulting work with Oasis' librarian before and after my trip via email and Skype's free internet calling service ([www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com)).

### **B. Do Not Be Discouraged**

Limitations may preclude creating an ideal situation, but don't let this stop you from doing anything. As I sought advice, nearly everyone was encouraging and helpful. However, after hearing about Oasis' limitations and constraints, a very few suggested there was no way the school could have a functioning library. Try to learn from such discouraging advice (it may help you identify key places to focus your energy), but do not let it deter you from reaching your goal. While you cannot accomplish everything, a focused vision and hard work will make a difference.

### **C. Seize The Opportunity!**

This final piece of advice is directed specifically towards librarians in a comfortably situated library who have the chance to help someone in a more difficult situation. Working with Oasis has been both personally refreshing and professionally rewarding as I sharpen my skills at recognizing and applying the core principles of librarianship in a radically different situation. Seize any opportunity that knocks at your door for making a difference in others' worlds.

## **8. Conclusion**

Even libraries challenged with an extremely restricted budget and the complexities of an international environment can take steps towards improving their collection. Strategies include: seeking targeted donations from publishers, granting organizations, individuals, and others; intelligently exploiting non-targeted donations; utilizing volunteers; carefully balancing preservation and access; and implementing a basic inventory/circulation system. My work with Oasis is just one story of success in a difficult situation. I encourage others to learn and share their knowledge and skills through work with libraries throughout the world.

### Endnotes

1. Here and throughout, I use the term “librarian” to refer to the individual in charge of Oasis’ library, even though the individual lacks formal library education. Besides being convenient and brief, this is the term generally used in Turkey for those in charge of school libraries.
2. Carefully investigate your airline’s baggage allowance rules before planning to transport materials in your luggage. If the materials weigh more than the free baggage allowance, evaluate whether it makes sense to pay for excess baggage. I paid for excess baggage after determining this was cheaper, simpler, and quicker than incurring international shipping costs.
3. Open source software is freely available; however, libraries are generally responsible for setting up and maintaining the software themselves. If an outside support contract is needed, this expense will come from the library’s pocket. See <http://www.opensource.org/> for more information on open source. Open source library systems include Koha (<http://www.koha.org>) and Evergreen (<http://www.open-ils.org/>).



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